Reimagining and Expanding Accelerated Learning at a Midwestern Minority-Serving Institution

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This article explores how a composition program at a minority serving, Midwestern university used an accelerated learning approach in its general education composition course sequence. Using research in the area of literacy theory and developmental education, as well as assessment data, the program designed a two-course general education composition sequence that includes increased instructional time, college credit, and an embedded peer-writing mentor. The major goal of the program is to provide students with an opportunity to strengthen their writing skills while continuing on the path toward graduation. This article outlines the ways the program has evolved over the past 20 years.

During the 1995-1996 academic year, one Midwestern minority serving institution, reviewed its composition program and made changes to its then developmental learning courses. As a result, the program established an accelerated learning program (ALP), and two new courses were introduced. The introduction of these courses essentially eliminated developmental or remedial English courses, in a traditional sense, and replaced them with college-level composition courses with embedded support to strengthen students' skills. Students were no longer required to take non-credit courses that were designed to "get them ready" for college-level courses. Students were not "mainstreamed" into courses, and students were not required to enroll in two courses at the same time. Support that students needed was included in a single course. The approach to ALP instruction employed by CSI considered the variety of experiences and linguistic features that students bring with them to the classroom as well as the financial situation of students who attend the university.

In addition, the ALP courses were further intended to develop students' critical thinking skills, strengthen their writing skills, and incorporate technology in the classroom. These courses have allowed the program to capitalize on the assets students brought to the environment by removing the developmental or remedial stigma. Furthermore, students have no longer had to pay for a course that did not satisfy a graduation requirement.

The overall goal of the redesign of the composition program's developmental sequence was to give students assistance on the front end so they could be successful as they move into more intense writing courses. The program took a themed approach to writing prompts that allowed students to write about contemporary issues. While this ALP model has been in place for approximately twenty years, assessment data and program review have led to changes over time. During the fall 2013 semester, an embedded peer-writing mentor was added to the first level ALP course. As of spring 2015, the program redesigned the second-level ALP course. The goal of this article is to describe the ways a minority serving institution reimagined and redesigned its traditional developmental English composition sequence into a sequence of courses the expanded on the idea of accelerated learning.

Developing the Accelerated Learning Program

Student preparedness for higher education has been explored from a historical perspective, including concerns expressed by Harvard professors about incoming their incoming students (Boylan, 2003). Literature suggests that first-year students have long had difficulty negotiating and adjusting to the college culture and its literacy expectations (Bartholomae, 1986; Conley, 2007; Gee, 2001; Lindquist & Seitz, 2009; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006; Rose, 1979, 1985; Young, 2004). To address concerns with under-preparedness, colleges and universities have attempted to employ a variety of strategies (Adams, Gearhart, Miller, & Roberts, 2009; Lalicker, 1999). Specifically, English composition is an area that has been explored because it tends to be a course in which students start developing college literacies that include but are not limited to writing. Writing is a skill that students use across disciplines and is often the method used for assessment of content knowledge, critical thinking, and communication. Composition courses also have the opportunity to ease the transition from high school to college by providing instruction that helps students make sense of the many implicit requirements of being successful in college. Conley (2007) notes, "one of the major reasons that students falter in college is the gap between their high-school experiences and college expectations" (p. 2). This gap can affect student retention. In a college course that requires writing, for example, instructors are expecting students to independently take themselves through the writing process and submit their best work. If students come to

college expecting one thing, so to speak, but arrive to find another, they may find themselves finished before they begin. Another issue that affects retention is time toward completion. Students who arrive at college and place into traditional non-credit courses may also leave before completion. What follows is an exploration of the specific ways the ALP model has been used at the university to assist students with developing and strengthening their writing and associated skills.

Accelerated Learning in Composition I

The content of the ALP English course is the same as the non-ALP Composition I course. The courses cover content judgment, analysis, introduction to argumentation and working with source material, and writing. The ALP course embeds the needed support (six hours of instructional time and the peer-writing mentor) to help students strengthen their skills in these areas and increase the likelihood of their moving out of the ALP sequence and on to the non-ALP Composition II course. Both courses also follow the same assessment plan in that students are required to produce, at minimum, four critical essays, four summaries and critiques of source material, five timed writing assessments, and a 400-450 word argumentative essay in 90 minutes. Three graders (faculty who teach Composition I, both ALP and non-ALP; and Composition II, both ALP and non-ALP courses, during the semester) score the exit assessment.

Accelerated Learning in Composition II

Initially, the program only provided accelerated support at the Composition I level. Students who passed the Composition I ALP course were allowed to enroll in Composition II, which requires a 2,500 word, multi-source research paper. As a result of continued program review and assessment data, it was determined that some students needed support throughout the entire two-course composition sequence. This continued review resulted in the introduction of a Composition II-level ALP course, which previously was designed to assist transfer students with their writing skills.

In order to be eligible for enrollment in the Composition II ALP course, students must earn at least a C grade, based on coursework and other measures, in the first composition course but have failed the exit essay assessment. In the Composition II ALP course, students continue to receive support while progressing through the composition sequence. It is believed that some Composition I students perform at an acceptable level (C or better) on course assignments but may have a difficult time demonstrating their ability in a timed situation, which is the 400-450 word argumentative exit essay assessment. Consequently, allowing these students to continue on to the Composition

II but with ongoing support seemed more appropriate than forcing students to repeat. To make the course comparable to Composition II, students are required to complete a research assignment. The Composition II ALP course is modeled after the Composition I ALP course and includes six hours per week of instructional time and a peer-writing mentor. The peer-writing mentors adhere to the same eligibility requirements as those assigned to mentor the ALP Composition I courses. In addition, program faculty also realized that although some students place into a non-ALP Composition I course, they are not ready to meet the expectations of the Composition II course where the instruction is more focused on research. Those students enroll in the Composition II level ALP course as well. The overall goal is to provide students with the support they need while keeping them in the pipeline and actively progressing toward graduation. Three graders (faculty who teach Composition I, both ALP and non-ALP and Composition II, both ALP and non-ALP courses during the semester) score the exit assessments.

Components of the ALP Courses

Increased Instructional Time

ALP models include a range of options in terms of providing students with additional support to help them acquire or further develop college-level literacy skills. Mainstreaming, simultaneous enrollment, and studio are among a few options that have been used in ALP courses. Research indicates that the more "hoops" students have to jump through in order to make it to "college-level" courses, the more likely they are to drop out or stop out (Adams, Gearhart, Miller & Roberts, 2009). To address this concern, the university's ALP model approaches studio time as an embedded/extended portion of the course. This translates into increased time for both instruction and practice as the studio time is actually built into the course. Specifically, the ALP model includes time during which students are able to practice their skills with the instructor present. For example, the studio is worked into the class meeting so courses might meet two days a week from 8:00 a.m. to10:45 a.m. Students earn and pay for a three-credit hour course, but they meet physically for six hours a week. The ALP courses meet in the English Literacy Center (ELC), which has 22 computers and a space for small groups and workshops.

The ALP courses include the same student learning outcomes as the non-ALP courses, which have been developed using Bloom's Taxonomy verbs (noted in bold in the list below). These goals are stated in this way, partly to make the learning outcomes transparent for students so that it will be clear what skills they will acquire during the class. In addition, these student-learning outcomes have

helped the program measure exactly what type of learning has taken place. These outcomes have also helped program faculty articulate, to both internal and external stakeholders, the skills taught in the course, something which has been helpful during conversations across disciplines. The outcomes are as follows:

1. **Develop and employ** strategies for invention, such as free writing, brainstorming, and clustering.
2. **Employ** the writing process, inventing, discovery, drafting, revising, editing, and polishing.
3. **Identify and apply** the formal requirements of academic expository essays.
4. **Apply** the rudiments of argumentative essays.
5. **Produce** accurate summaries of texts.
6. **Avoid** plagiarism.
7. **Identify** ways that the audience and purpose for writing shape a written work.
8. **Increase critical thinking skills** and understanding of social issues.
9. **Apply** the conventions for writing in Standard Edited American English.
10. **Demonstrate** the ability to use conventions for writing in Standard Edited American English.
11. **Develop** an extemporaneous argumentative essay of 400–450 words in a timed examination.

The recent addition of peer writing mentors, who are embedded into the ALP courses, is intended to help students better meet these learning outcomes. Mentors are available both during and after class to assist students.

Peer-Writing Mentor

The decision to add peer-writing mentors was based on a review of the ways the writing center has been used by students in the first-year composition sequence. This review showed that students did not independently seek out tutoring services, but instead tended to visit the learning center when tutoring was mandated or attached to a grade. Furthermore, it was also found that many of the course requirements and instructor expectations were being "lost in translation," so to speak, when students attempted to communicate their teachers' expectations with tutors. As a result, the program sought ways to provide students with more seamless access to writing support. The program worked with the First-Year Experience unit to develop the embedded peer-writing mentor model.

During a midterm meeting, faculty discussed the use of the learning center to try to uncover if and how students were encouraged to seek assistance from an outside tutor. The discussion revealed the following key points:

1. Composition instructors did not have a system for encouraging and/or requiring students to seek help at the learning center.
2. Composition instructors were not confident with the type/quality of assistance students reported receiving in the learning center.
3. Composition instructors were not confident that students would actually go to the learning center.

Based on assessment data, composition instructors agreed that students needed additional help with basic writing tasks including but not limited to invention and polishing. Faculty were reluctant to tell an instructor that he or she "must" require a student to visit the learning center, but it was also concluded that students needed and benefited from quality assistance outside of class. The first step in resolving this tension was following the lead of the Foreign Languages and Literatures (FLL) division of the department. The FLL department requires students who are enrolled in a 1000-level Foreign Language course to visit the language lab at least 10 times throughout the semester. Students must have their language lab card signed by the tutor each time they visit. Since the department had just developed an English Literacy Center, some faculty and staff thought that developing a tutoring requirement for the ALP Composition I course could be resolved in this way. Students would be required to visit the ELC tutor and have their ELC card signed. However, some composition faculty members were still a bit resistant to assigning points for visiting the ELC, and in short, did not want to be responsible for monitoring this added requirement. Also, this plan did not resolve the issue of students getting the specific help the instructor wanted. Students still needed to be able to communicate their needs to a tutor that might know little about the instructor's expectations. Beginning in the fall 2013 semester, the department tried a new approach to providing students with opportunities to seek additional assistance outside of class. The First-Year Experience division provided seed money for the embedded peer-writing mentors in the Composition I ALP course.

During the first semester of the embedded peer-writing mentor program, the mentors were graduate students majoring in English. Each mentor was required to attend each course he or she was assigned to cover for the entire class meeting. Since the ALP sections meet for extended time, the mentors were able to assist students during the practical application period of the class in the form of leading small group workshops and one-on-one assistance. The course instructor also worked with students during this time. The mentors were in place on the first day of class. After the first implementation of the peer-writing mentor, the exit essay data revealed that pass rates increased by 10% from the previous semester. At this point, the program decided to continue to develop the use of peer writing mentors in the ALP courses.

As mentors graduated or were not able to return to their mentoring post for the next semester, the program was somewhat forced to redesign the program requirements, which initially only offered the opportunity to graduate English majors. The program began to reach out to undergraduate students who met the eligibility requirements.

Peer-writing mentor eligibility requirements To be eligible for participation in the program as a mentor, students must (a) be in good academic standing, (b) have earned at least 60 credit hours, (c) have passed the university writing assessment, (d) be enrolled full-time, (e) pass the assessment of grammar and writing, and (f) successfully complete the interview process. The process allows the director of composition and the department chair to vet the mentors prior to putting them in a class where they will have to work with both the instructor and students.

To reach a larger pool of eligible students who also had the flexibility to attend a course during the morning and afternoon hours, the program allowed both undergraduate and graduate students who met the six requirements to serve as peer-writing mentors. The mentors also hold "office hours" outside of the class meetings where students can go to get additional assistance. The mentor program allows students to build a relationship and have a single point of contact with someone designated to provide them with assistance. In addition, the instructors feel more comfortable with sending their students to the mentors outside of class time because they know the mentors are aware of the course and assignment requirements. The classroom instructors have also mentored the mentors, and the mentors undergo a national training program that is provided by the learning center.

Working with the peer-writing mentor outside of class

As previously stated, the composition faculty members have agreed that students benefit from quality help outside of class. However, during the first year of the program, faculty reported that they only *suggested* or *encouraged* students to meet with the writing mentor outside of class and did not track if students actually took advantage of the mentor for additional help. It became clear that students—and faculty—needed a process if the assistance outside of class was to be used effectively. To help facilitate this, in the spring of 2015, the program developed a referral sheet and criteria for mandating that students see the mentor for help. The referral sheet was activated every time a student received below a C grade on any assignment. The instructor completed the referral, with detailed instructors for the mentor, and gave the sheet to the student. The student took the sheet to the mentor during the out-of-class session, and the mentor completed the remainder of the form detailing

the assistance that was provided. The mentor then signed the form and returned it to the instructor to verify that the student received assistance as required. In an effort to "put some teeth" into this procedure, it was also agreed that that instructors would not accept the next assignment until the student had visited the mentor. This meant that the instructor, the student, and the mentor were accountable. If the student did not make an appointment with the mentor in a timely fashion, then the student might miss an opportunity to submit the next assignment. In addition, the mentor was responsible for meeting with the student and verifying that the student received assistance. This "closing the loop" approach resulted in the program's ability to track how the mentors were utilized more closely, and it also helped the instructor integrate the mentor more into the class. A further important point that the department faculty agreed on is that mentors are not a replacement for instructors' office hours. Instructors are still responsible for holding office hours and assisting students. In many cases, however, the mentors have allowed faculty to work with students who needed more instructor attention.

Much of the research in the area of developmental education focuses on community colleges; however, many students entering universities are still unable to demonstrate college-level literacy skills, so this is an issue universities face as well. This particular ALP model shares similarities with other ALP models in that it reduces the time spent in developmental non-credit course work. What makes this ALP model unique is that it was started long before the call of the last few years to reduce the number of developmental courses for students; in addition, it allows all students to begin with college-level composition; in addition, many who would have in the past had to repeat Composition I, can now continue on to an ALP Composition II course, both of which include embedded support to help students strengthen their skills. Students in the ALP courses complete the same work as those in the non-ALP courses. This speaks to the call issued by Adams (1993) in his work, Basic Writing Reconsidered. Adams (1993) states,

> As Pat Bizzell put it at the summer conference of the council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) in 1988, we are now teaching fairly much the same way whether we are teaching in a basic writing classroom, a freshman English classroom, or a senior writing seminar; students are writing, and we and they are talking about their writing. The *levels* of performance may differ but the *types* of performance demanded are quite similar. (p. 24)

It has been the goal of the university's ALP faculty to make the line between the ALP courses and those considered "traditional" composition courses almost invisible.

Reflections on Acceleration

As stated by Boylan (2003), students have always needed further development when entering college. In an environment where many students receive some form of financial assistance, spending time in non-credit courses or repeating courses may have a negative impact on students both intellectually and financially. The ALP model has helped to resolve that tension. This model has provided students with access to college-credit and skill-building opportunities. Many factors contribute to retention and persistence. Initially, this program was envisioned as a means to address students' need for development while keeping them in the pipeline, reduce time toward degree completion, and avoid exhausting financial assistance before completion. As the program faculty continued to review data and make adjustments, the program developed into a model for helping students move beyond the stigma of being in a "developmental" course and helping the university rethink its approach to helping students.

The question here is not whether the ALP model has been successful, but rather has the composition program continued to evolve to meet the needs of the students who attend.

Since the 1995-1996 academic year, the composition program has utilized an ALP approach to serving the needs of students in the composition sequence. The provocative questions that one might ask regarding this program include: Are students better writers? Does this approach result in students earning a degree faster or at all? The reality is that those questions are difficult to answer and a sequence of two courses is not the determining factor. We would like to think that the ALP approach has kept students who enter the university still in need of writing development engaged and progressing toward completion of a degree. The goal that prompted the development of this ALP model was to retain them from one semester to the next so they can continue to receive the support they need. If the idea of ALP as a method for retaining students is kept at the forefront, the data has provided the program with insight. What we do know is that 41% of the fall 2013 FTF ALP cohort was still enrolled as of spring 2015, 33% of the fall 2013 FTF cohort enrolled in Composition II immediately after passing the ALP Composition I, and 75% of the cohort completed Composition II with a final grade of C or higher. This means that we know 41% of the students in the ALP fall 2013 cohort completed four complete semesters of college, which is about double the graduation rate. Composition faculty hope the 2016-2017 academic year brings more insight in regard to degree completion. What is true is that there are a variety of factors that influence student success, and developmental education can indeed become a barrier (Adams, et al., 2009; Brancard, DeLott Baker, Jensen, 2006; Edgecombe, 2011; Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Smith, Jaggars, Edgecombe, 2010). Accelerated learning has the potential to provide students with the needed spring board into college that allows them to be supported as they accumulate the skills that they need for success.

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Appendix A: University Demographics

By definition, this university is a minority-serving institution (MSI). By enrollment, this institution is a predominately Black/African American institution (PBI). MSIs are defined as institutions that enroll a high number of minorities (O'Brien & Zudak, 1998). According to data in the university fact book, in the fall of 1996, when the two accelerated English courses were new, the undergraduate enrollment was 6,892 students. Freshman enrollment was 95% percent African American and 70% of undergraduate students were between the ages of 18-19. As of fall 2014, enrollment was about 5,000 students. The institution has consistently served a large number of students in transition, either from the local city secondary school district or from the city community college system. During the fall 2014 semester, 65% of undergraduate students received Pell Grants, with 57% living at or below the poverty line and 57% of the students who attend the university were first generation. Approximately 34% of the fall 2014 first-time freshman (FTF) enrolled in the accelerated Composition I course.

Data from the university fact book.

Appendix B: Writing Assessment and Placement

Students entering the university are required to take the COMPASS eWrite essay placement examination. Once students are placed and enrolled in the appropriate composition course, students are given a pretest during the second week of class. This pretest is required of both ALP Composition I students and non-ALP Composition I students, is administered during class time, and is modeled after the final exit essay examination that is administered during week 16. The week two pretest allows the instructor to (a) become familiar with the students enrolled in the course as writers, and (b) adjust instruction so that it is meaningful for the students who are actually enrolled in the course. ALP courses are also able to utilize the peer-writing mentor immediately, and in addition, the instructor, the student, and the program can more easily gauge student growth at the end of the course (when students complete the exit essay examination). This section will explain each method of assessing student writing from entry into the university until exit from the composition course sequence.

University Placement Examination

Table 1 illustrates the English placement exam cutoff scores. All students are required to take the university placement examination, regardless of their ACT scores. Based on the placement results, students are *required* to enroll in either the accelerated Composition I course or the non-accelerated Composition I course. After 2010, the university moved to the COMPASS eWrite system and data regarding pass rates were no longer tracked internally. In addition, the rubric used to evaluate students' writing was also not available. Provided in this section is a summary of the components of students' writing that are evaluated. Figure 1 provides an example of a writing prompt for the diagnostic placement examination.

Table 1. English Placement Cutoff Scores

Student Status	Score on COMPASS eWrite	Placement
Freshman	2–8	Accelerated Composition I
Freshman	9–12	Non-accelerated Composition I
Transferring Composition I	2–7	Accelerated Composition II
Transferring Composition I	8–12	Non-accelerated Composition II

Figure 1. Sample Diagnostic Placement Examination Prompts

Write a well-organized, well-developed 300-350-word argumentative response.
Write a letter to your local council member advocating for a community project.

With the changes to the literacy skills students are taught in high school because of the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, the university saw it fitting to move from an expository writing prompt to an argumentative writing prompt. Students may retest once. The placement exam is the prerequisite for the first course in the composition sequence. Students must perform at the novice level [score 9 or above] to be eligible to enroll in the Composition I course that is not in the ALP.

Summary of Scoring Guide for Evaluating Placement Examinations

The placement examination requires students to develop a 300-350 word argumentative essay that addresses an issue identified by a provided prompt. Students must demonstrate their ability to take a position or make a claim, develop a thesis statement, and support their position or claim. At least two sides of the issue must be provided in the essay. The quality of the writing is assessed in the following areas: a) focus: stays on topic; b) content: includes relevant detail; c) organization: clear introduction, body, and conclusion; d) style: uses academic language; and e) conventions: minimal errors in grammar.

Appendix C: Accelerated Learning Program Data and Associated Program Changes—A Historical Review

The ALP model has been used by this university for about 20 years. The program has a history of collecting and making adjustments to the program based on the assessment data. The program also has made adjustments to the way data are collected in order to provide instruction that is helpful as students negotiate and adjust to the writing demands of college. This section will explore assessment data for the years when major changes were made to the program (2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2015). Table 1 illustrates the major changes that have occurred over the last six years and provides data for the exit essay assessment that are aligned to those changes. Each change will be explored in-depth in this section. Table 2 provides assessment data for both the ALP and non-ALP Composition I courses respectively.

Table 1. ALP exit assessment pass rates aligned with program changes.
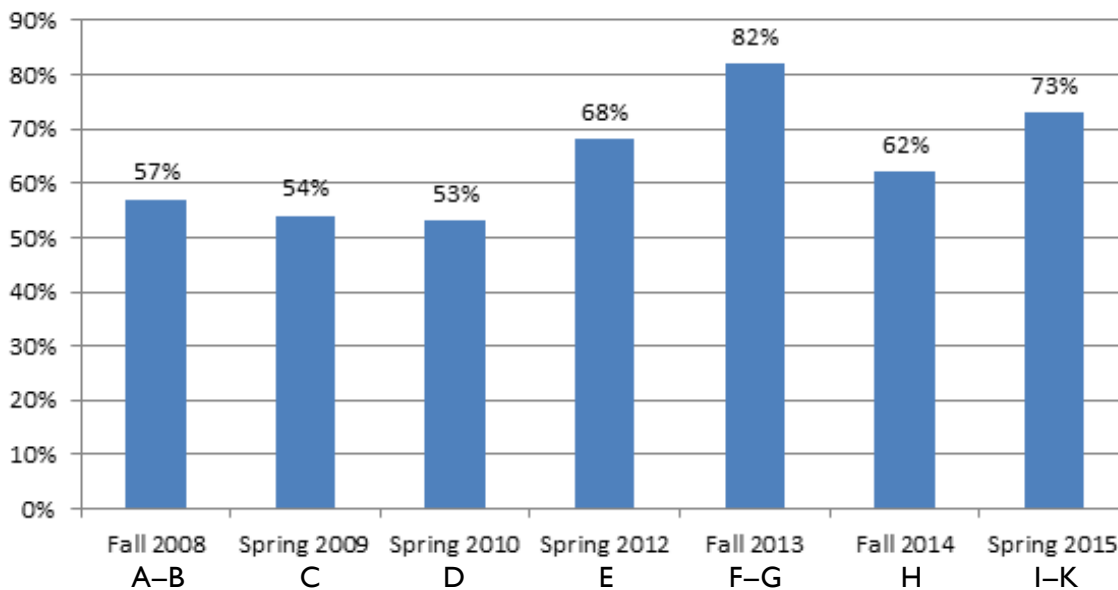
Changes to Program
A. Assessment instrument changed
B. Assessment embedded in course
C. Students type the assessment in the ELC
D. Mandatory end of the semester assessment conference
E. Reading component added

F. Peer writing mentors were embedded
G. Reading packet distributed 3 weeks prior to exam
H. Theme developed throughout the semester
I. Course sessions taught in ELC
J. Pretest added
K. Referral form added

Table 2. Non-ALP exit assessment pass rates aligned with program changes
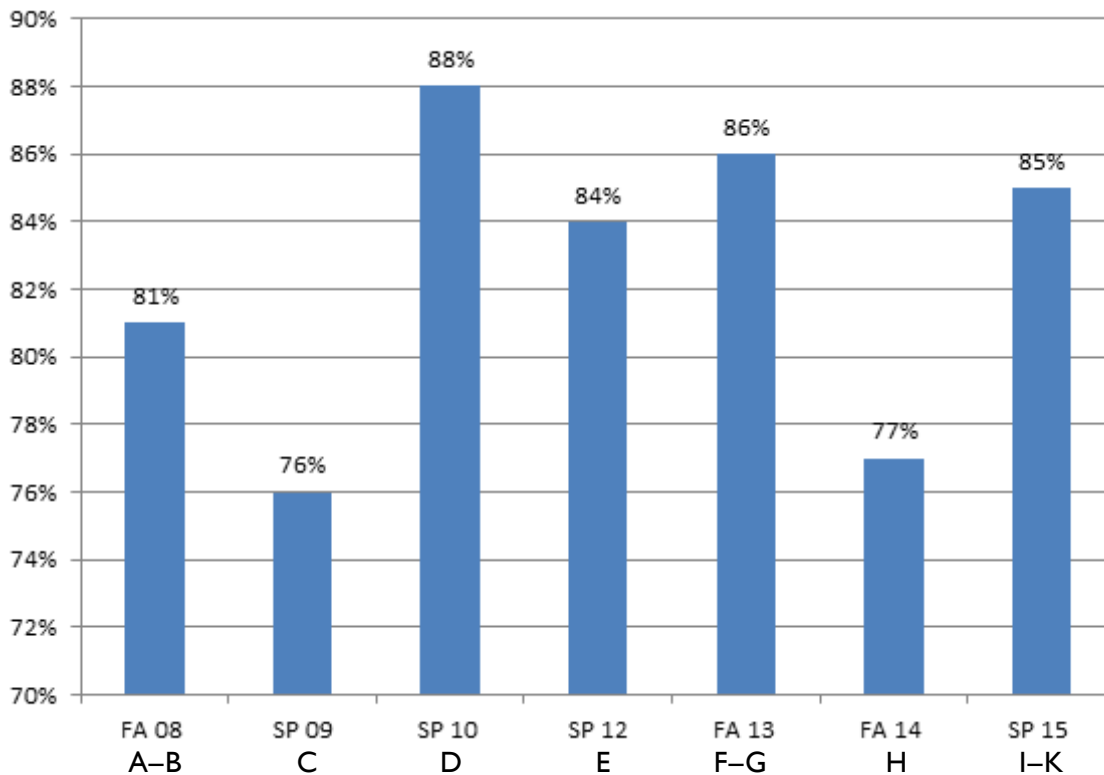
Changes to Program

A. Assessment instrument changed
B. Assessment embedded in course
C. Students type the assessment in the ELC
D. Mandatory end of the semester assessment conference
E. Reading component added

F. Reading packet distributed 3 weeks prior to exam
G. Theme developed throughout the semester
H. Course sessions taught in ELC
I. Pretest added

The following section provides an in-depth discussion of the major changes that have taken place in both the ALP and non-ALP Composition I courses over time. The program faculty had agreed from the start that since the ALP Composition I course carries the same college credit as the non-ALP composition courses, any changes made to the Composition I course would be made at both levels (ALP and non-ALP). This has helped to make a stronger case that the ALP course is not simply a "watered down" version of the non-ALP course. The ALP course covers the same content, is assessed in the same way, and holds to same "end result" concerning students' production of a 400-450 word argumentative essay in 90-minutes. As discussed previously in this article, the ALP courses have built-in supports in the form of the embedded peer writing mentors and increased instructional time to help students meet this goal. What has been discovered is that the major changes made had the same effect on both the ALP and non-ALP courses. That is, when a change was introduced, if the exit assessment pass rates decreased or increased in the ALP section, the pass rates increased or decreased in the non-ALP section. This caused the program to review the change for effectiveness and make adjustments as

needed because it became clear that the changes had an effect on all students.

Fall 2008

Two major changes occurred in the fall 2008 semester. The first changed was to the type of assessment administered. The second change was to the way the students produced the examination. These changes resulted in more robust data. Prior to the fall 2008 semester, the exit examination required students to produce a 300-350 word essay in response to an expository prompt. Students were allowed 90-minutes to draft and polish the piece of writing. This assessment matched the university placement examination. Based on a review of the pass rates and discussions regarding the types of writing students would be required to produce as they move into Composition II and writing-intensive courses beyond the general education composition sequence, faculty decided to adjust the assessment so that it prepared students for writing experiences beyond composition. Since the university placement examination was also a 300-350 expository essay, the composition program faculty felt that it was not able to determine if growth had occurred. Beginning in the fall

2008 semester, the Composition I (ALP and non-ALP courses) exit essay assessment was changed to a 400-450 word argumentative essay. This change allowed the program to measure skill growth and skill change.

The exit exams in the Composition courses were administered on the Saturday prior to the week of final examinations. The exam was administered in a large room with all composition instructors present, and students were required to handwrite the exam using specialized examination paper. At the end of the 90-minutes testing period, each instructor collected the examinations for the course(s) he or she was teaching, verified that all students completed the examination, and gave the examinations to the director of composition for sorting in preparation for the departmental grading day. This process had been in place for at least 20 years. Students who missed the examination day were allowed to make-up the exam on the next Saturday. After review of the missed exam data, it was determined that there was a high incidence of students missing the examination and the missed exam testing date. Also, when faculty reported student data, all students who did not attend the initial exam testing date were reported as missed exam students. This made it difficult to prepare for the missed-exam date because some of the "missed exam" students actually unofficially withdrew from the course or stopped attending and had no intention of taking the exam. Also, some students simply did not attend the exam on the first testing date and "opted" to attend the missed-exam date. For some students, this made registering for courses difficult because they did not realize that the exam was a prerequisite for many upper-level courses within and outside of the English department. Some majors use this assessment as an indicator for a students' readiness for upper-level, critical thinking courses that are writing-intensive. This left students and the English department with the task of trying to offer an opportunity for testing after the semester had concluded. Furthermore, this impacted program data as the data reports had already been submitted to university-wide committees, thus, making the data not an accurate reflection of all students in the composition program.

In an attempt to reduce the number of students who missed this final high stakes exam, in the fall 2008, the department decided to offer the exam during the regularly scheduled class time. This drastically reduced the number of students missing the examination, and the program was able to more accurately capture the range of student skills in the assessment documents. Because students are allowed 90 minutes to produce the exam, the department scheduled the Composition I courses using a two-day a week meeting schedule.

Spring 2009

To increase students' use of technology and provide them with an opportunity to develop and practice the skills they would most likely use in their careers, the program phased out the handwritten examination and required all students to produce a typed document in the department's English Literacy Center. To increase students' technology skills, each class was scheduled to meet at least one day a week in the English Literacy Center, which is a full computer lab. The program felt that students would most likely be required to produce written documents in electronic format as they matriculated and as they began their careers.

Spring 2010

Part of the exit assessment process is that students meet with the instructors to review the examination and get the examination results so that they know in which class to enroll during the next semester. This is an important part of the process because students who do not conference with the instructor are likely to enroll in the wrong course and then be dropped from that course. This often had an impact on scheduling as well as a student's financial assistance since students are typically dropped within the first week of the semester. If a student is not able to enroll in the appropriate course or find a course to replace those lost credit hours, his or her registration status could change from full- to part-time and result in reduced financial aid or debt to the university. The department instituted a required exit exam conference. Students were required to sign up for a conference time during the designated exit exam conference period. A notice was sent to the student's academic advisor if the student did not attend. This change resulted in a reduction in the number of students registering for the wrong English Composition II course. This also kept the student engaged with the instructor until final grades were submitted. This conference allowed both the student and the instructor to discuss the exit assessment results and overall course progress prior to the final submission of grades. In addition, academic advisors were kept in the loop concerning student progress.

Spring 2012

The English essay-scoring guide that was used to assess student essays and the exit assessment were both reviewed in light of the other assessment changes. The scoring guide that was used from about 1996 was a holistic rubric. After review of the scoring guide, program-level outcomes, and student-level outcomes, it was determined that the holistic guide did not offer much detail in regard to student writing strengths and areas in need of further development. As previously stated, three scorers evaluate the exit assessment. The course instructor serves as the

first reader of the exam, and two additional faculty members score each exam. Two of the three scores must be passing in order for the assessment to receive the passing designation. This is the same for a not passing designation. The revised scoring guide provided clear level progression, assigned a score for each element of the rubric, and provided an overall score for the entire paper. This allowed scorers to give students credit for what they did well in their assessment and point to areas where development was still needed, which made the exit assessment conference more useful for both the student and instructor. The overall goal of the program is to provide students with foundational skills and with information about their writing that can and will be further developed throughout their time in college. The holistic rubric did not provide that level of specificity.

Fall 2013

The program expanded the idea of the mentor texts or reading packet that was first introduced in the spring of 2012. Students were typically provided with the reading packet in preparation for the exit assessment at least two weeks in advance of the assessment date. This allowed instructors an opportunity to review the packet with students. It also allowed instructors an opportunity to help students make connections between the skills they had learned in class and ways to apply them to the exit assessment. In an attempt to provide students and instructors with more time to work with the reading packet, the program decided to provide the reading packet to instructors for distribution at least three weeks in advance of the assessment date. As it turned out, during this semester, there was a 10% increase in exit assessment pass rates. Faculty believe that this additional time with the reading material contributed to the increase.

Fall 2014

The reading packet, or mentor text, typically explores a current event or issue that has occurred in the world during the semester. Since instructors do not know what issue or event will be addressed by the reading material, they spend the semester building students' writing skills in general and not necessarily around a specific idea or topic. The program faculty believe that this has helped students "learn to write" instead of "learning to address a topic." However, the faculty also decided to try a thematic approach, which allowed students to develop their writing and thinking around a specific theme for the entire semester. The exit assessment would then be based on that particular theme. Faculty voted on the theme a semester in advance. This approach proved to be more difficult than expected. It was difficult to keep students engaged in a particular theme for the entire semester as each semester

brings its own current events and issues. Instructors also felt that this approach was limiting and, in fact, may have contributed to the decrease in the pass rates for the exit assessment. Consequently, faculty decided to return to the more broad approach to writing instruction that centered on a particular theme after the reading packet was distributed.

Spring 2015

Before the spring 2015 semester, the program used the university English placement examination as the pretest for both the ALP and non-ALP Composition I courses. As previously mentioned in this article, during ongoing program review of data, it was determined that as assessment changes occurred in the program and at the university, the university English placement examination was no longer an accurate pretest. The program developed a pretest that was more closely aligned with the exit assessment. This program change was discussed, in detail, in Appendix B.

Overall, spring 2009 and fall 2014 reflect a "valley" concerning pass rates on the exit assessment. What was revealed is that during the spring 2009 semester, students were required to type the assessment during the 90-minute time allotted for the assessment. Issues with technology use were noted as a barrier to student success during this semester, and, at this time, the department only had one computer lab/literacy center. The one departmental computer lab/literacy center meant that instructors could only hold one class meeting per week in the center. Students, especially those with technology anxiety, were not able to build their skills and confidence through practice. Students communicated anxiety around the ability to produce a typed exam in 90 minutes and some students had limited exposure to computers. This change was also an adjustment for instructors, as they had to be strategic in their planning of practice assessments and in class writings. Instructors had to be sure to schedule in-class writing sessions on days when their courses met in the literacy center. This was an instructional shift. The program used these data to propose university support for the renovation of the literacy center and the establishment of an additional center. The proposal was accepted, resulting in increased class time spent in the literacy center practicing and building students technology-related skills. Instructors and students were able to adjust to the new technology component of the Composition I courses (ALP and non-ALP) and, in spring 2015, the program was able to establish and dedicate two literacy centers to Composition I, ALP and non-ALP courses.

The program saw another "valley," so to speak, in the data during the fall 2014 semester, which was the semester the program took a thematic approach to writing develop-

ment for the entire semester. At that time, faculty reported concerns that the thematic approach was limiting and they were not able to engage students' skills around current events that were happening in the world during the semester. The program continues to collect and review data each semester at two points. Instructors review pretest data as a group and make adjustments based on their students' skills.

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